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Thoughts on Intellectual Freedom

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For an 87-year-old couch potato, I had a pretty wild weekend late in October. I actually made my way across the mountains, thanks to my friend who kindly offered to take me to the annual meeting of the Colorado Library Association in Colorado Springs. As a matter of fact, “offered” is not quite the word. She and my other friends threatened me with dire happenings if I did not make a personal appearance at this meeting.

The C.L.A. has over a hundred years of service to the people of Colorado, and I attended several of their annual meetings during my 25 years as a catalog librarian. But this one was special. I was due to receive the Julie J. Boucher Award for Intellectual Freedom.

I grew up taking freedom of speech and freedom of religion for granted. After all, both are assured under the law of the United States. But I found that receiving an award for something I believe in so deeply was very special, like—well, the cherry on a hot fudge sundae. It is not essential, but it sure does make the whole thing taste better.

Freedom is a beautiful word. It comes from the Old English word “freo,” meaning “not in bondage, noble, glad, illustrious.” It is the word upon which our country was founded.

My active interest in the cause of Intellectual Freedom has been growing for most of my life. It was probably at Colorado University that I first really began to understand the First Amendment to the Constitution.

And it is only logical that my deep respect for Intellectual Freedom matured during 25 years working in the Mesa County Public Library in Grand Junction, Colorado. In the eleven years since my retirement, writing a weekly newspaper column has given me a voice.

Human beings have instinctively wanted to record and preserve their history and their thoughts since cave people started drawing pictures on their walls. The earliest known library was a collection of

clay tablets in Babylonia in the 21st century B.C. Later, records were kept on papyrus, then on paper, and now on the computer and the World Wide Web.

In our own country, the Boston Public Library, established in 1848, was the first publicly supported municipal library, and the first public library to allow people to borrow books and materials. This was a truly revolutionary concept at the time. It is still a revolutionary concept according to the would-be censors who keep protesting it.

Americans don’t agree with each other always, or often—or it sometimes seems, ever. We belong to different organizations, go to different churches, read different kinds of books. But there is one place where all of our ideas are welcome—the public library, which welcomes free thinkers of all kinds.

You can sit in a chair in the library reading a trashy novel, and on one side of you someone is reading Thomas Paine, and on the other side someone is reading the Koran. It is the only institution in America whose sole purpose is to guard against the tyranny of ignorance and conformity. Today the free public library is the visible symbol of the First Amendment.

The Code of Ethics of the American Library Association says in part, “We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.” And then came September 11. We are now living in a dangerous time—dangerous to us physically, and dangerous to the civil liberties which are the foundation of our country. We are in a new kind of war and must defend our freedoms while defending our country, else there is nothing to defend.


On September 12 a broad coalition of civil liberties groups, political, religious and related organizations was established because of concern over threats to civil liberties in this time of war. More than 150 organizations, including, of course, the American Library Association, 300 law professors and 40 computer scientists issued a statement “In Defense of Freedom.” Their statement says in part,



"We need to ensure that actions by our government uphold the principles of a democratic society, accountable government and international law, and that all decisions are taken in a manner consistent with the Constitution.

"We can, as we have in the past, in times of war and peace, reconcile the requirements of security with the demands of liberty.

"We affirm the right of peaceful dissent, protected by the First Amendment now when it is most at risk."

Now more than ever it is the responsibility of libraries to protect our freedom of ideas—and the freedom to express them. Intellectual Freedom is not just two words. It is what America stands for. 



Getting Through the Wilderness

*She gathered words to shelter her children.
Do you have a warm coat, clean handkerchief,
enough strong words to bring you through dark?*

*The wordless crash like bears through stark bushes,
or mouse-like creep, fearing war's death in large paws.
Moles tunnel blindly searching for grubs.*

*She gathered words, held like small lanterns.
Wrapped in thought and warm coats, adding our words,
we move by that light from point to faint point.*

*She gathered courage to make the last passage.
Our children grow older. While wars flare anew,
they take up their words, pick their way from our trail.*

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